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ABSTRACT

"Indian Boyhood," by Charles Eastman; "Kaibah: Recollections of a Navajo Girlhood," by Kay Bennett and "The Education of Little Tree," by Forrest Carter are autobiographies that offer unique opportunities for upper elementary and junior high school students to understand the lifestyles and values of Native Americans. The Indian lifestyle is part of American culture, but it is important that young people understand more about Indians than pow-wows, eagle feathers, and scalping. "Indian Boyhood," the oldest of the three books, is more topical than chronological. It moves in a series of self-contained chapters, often without much connection from one to another. "Kaibah" demonstrates a bit more awareness of time and the passage of time, but may not seem like an autobiography, because it is written in the third person. Some teachers will find the language a bit difficult in "The Education of Little Tree," but it is a good lesson in regional dialects, since much of the story is of a child growing up in the backwoods of Tennessee. In spite of these problems, the reader learns about values that are especially Indian. All three children learn to live with nature and to work with it without abusing it. (HTH)

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Three Indian Autobiographies for the Junior High School
Anna Lee Stensland

An Indian autobiographer may tell his or her story for a number of different reasons. Some, like Geronimo or Black Hawk, told their stories because they were leaders of their people during difficult times and wanted later generations to understand the events as they saw them. Others, like Left Handed, Two Leggings and Jim Whitewolf, told theirs because they were typical members of their tribes who wanted to record and explain the way of life that was disappearing.

Because many of the Indians of the past who told their life stories knew little or no English, we are dependent upon their editors, recorders or translators. Reading Black Elk Speaks, for example, we might very well ask, "What parts are Black Elk speaking, what parts are the words of his son, Ben, who translated the story, and what parts are the words of John Neihardt, who wrote and edited the book?" Three Indians, from very different times and places, have concentrated upon their Indian childhoods, writing their stories without the aid of recorders, translators or editors: Charles Eastman, a Santee Sioux, wrote in Indian Boyhood of his childhood in Minnesota, North Dakota and Manitoba during the years 1858 to 1871. This was the period just before, during and after the Minnesota Uprising of 1862. Kay Bennett, in Kaibah: Recollections of a Navajo Girlhood tells of her childhood in a hogan in New Mexico from 1928 to 1936, and most recently, Forrest Carter, in The Education of Little Tree, tells of his childhood during the 1930s in his Cherokee grandparents' log cabin in the mountains of Tennessee.

These three Indian autobiographies offer unique opportunities to help upper elementary and junior high school students understand the life styles and values of our earliest Americans. If there are some elements which make our American culture distinct from the British culture out of which it grew, one of the most important of these is

our contact with the American Indian. List our states named after Indians -- Iowa, Wisconsin, Delaware, to name only a few; our cities -- Seattle, Milwaukee, Peoria; our rivers -- the Missouri, the Cheyenne, Chattahoochee; and our lakes -- Erie, Huron, Saginaw. Look at our American writers who were fascinated by Indian themes -- Freneau, Bryant, Longfellow, Thoreau, Emerson, Cather and Faulkner. The Native Americans and their life styles are part of American culture. But it is important that young people understand more about Indians than pow-wows, eagle feathers and scalping.

James Olney in Metaphors of Self: the Meaning of Autobiography says, "...for the common reader autobiography taken, by and large, is the most appealing form of literature... it is the literature that most immediately and deeply engages our interest and holds it and that in the end seems to mean the most to us because it brings an increasing awareness, through an understanding of another life in another time and place, of the nature of our own selves and our share in the human condition."¹ Because of certain subject matter and style, however, some young people may find these particular autobiographies difficult without some help.

The oldest of the three books, Indian Boyhood, was written first by the author for his own children, to tell them about a way of life which was even then disappearing, and then in 1902 it was published. Young people are used to reading a chronological story of a boy's life. They will not find it in Indian Boyhood. They will, instead, find a story which is more topical than chronological. Indians of Eastman's tribe were not very concerned about an exact date or place. Eastman begins in a way at the beginning, but he does not give us his birth date nor precise place of birth. What is far more important is who he is -- "the son of the handsomest woman of all the Spirit Lake and Leaf Dweller Sioux,"² a child whose grandmother was descended from a haughty chieftain of the Dwellers among the Leaves and whose great grandfather was Chief Cloud Man. Far

more important than precise time and place was the story of his birth, an event which he says his brothers recalled often with much mirth, "for it was the custom of the Sioux that when a boy was born his brother must plunge into the water, or roll in the snow naked if it was winter time; and if he was not big enough to do either of these himself water was thrown on him.... The idea was that a warrior had come to camp, and other children must display some act of hardihood."³ The autobiography is topical, containing such chapters as "My Indian Grandmother," "My Playmates," "Evening in the Lodge," and "A Winter Camp." He tells us about early hardships when the Santee Sioux were forced into exile by the Sioux Uprising in Minnesota. He does tell us that he was a little over four years old at the time. He describes the pursuit of part of the tribe by General Sibley across the Missouri River, the thrill of a blizzard which overtook them the following winter, during which the family lay for a day and a night under the snow, and the betrayal of his father and two older brothers at Winnipeg during the second winter after the Uprising. All of these events occurred between 1862 and 1864. But two chapters later he describes an Indian sugar camp in Minnesota, an event which had to take place before the Uprising. This is followed by yet another chapter, "A Midsummer Feast," an event at which the boy received his name, Ohiyesa, meaning "winner." This chapter, too, took place in Minnesota, since Chief Mankato, who was chief of the village and played an important part in the selection of the name, was killed in the Battle of Wood Lake during the Uprising.

Kai-bah demonstrates a bit more awareness of time and the passage of time, but such movement is very slow, and many chapters are topical around subjects dealing with sheep-herding, rather than chronological. The events often are not specific but rather are those repeated often -- the move to the mountains with the sheep each summer; lambing, which occurred each year; planting and the harvest. The rhythm is that of events which

reoccur each year. Awareness of time is somewhat more definite as a tramp appears at the family hogan, the result of the white man's depression of 1930, as the drought of the '30s occurs and as John Collier calls for a reduction in the size of the Navajo herds. The main event in Kaibah's life is going off to school and eventually leaving the reservation. An additional difficulty for students reading Kaibah is that it may not seem like an autobiography because it is written in the third person. It is as if the adult Indian woman, who married a white engineer and accompanied him to Afghanistan for two years, is standing back and observing her girlhood in the hogan looking after the sheep as the experience of someone else. Students might assume that this is fiction.

Forrest Carter in The Education of Little Tree also makes very little of exact time and place. We know that Little Tree was five when he went to live with his Cherokee grandparents, but how long he stayed there, how old he was when he left for school and when he finally left Tennessee for the Nations and beyond is insignificant. Neither do we know where Little Tree lived before he went to Tennessee, nor where in Tennessee his grandparents lived in the mountains. Distances which Little Tree and his grandfather walked are not explained very clearly.

N. Scott Momaday's statement concerning art and reality in the Indian mind is evident in all three of these books: "We are concerned here not so much with an accurate representation of actuality but with the realization of the imaginative experience."⁴

Although The Education of Little Tree has Indian background, since Little Tree lives and learns from his Cherokee grandparents, much of his story is that of a child growing up in the backwoods of Tennessee, learning to live with Nature and to respect it. Some teachers will find the language a bit difficult to reconcile with what they have been teaching, but the story can be a good lesson in regional dialects. Listen to Little Tree describe the scene after two people had delivered the papers which were to take him away from his grandparents because he was not in school: "I went and set

in my rocker by the fireplace and rocked. I told Granma and Granpa that I figgered I could up my dictionary learning to practically ten words a week. I told them that more than likely I could up it even more -- maybe a hundred. I was learning to read, and I told them I seen right off that I was going to have to double up on my reading, and I reminded them what Mr. Wine had said about my figgering."⁵

These, then, are some of the problems. For young people used to writing and reading chronological autobiographies which move along from one incident to another, these Indian autobiographies may seem at times to stand still. Indian Boyhood moves in a series of self-contained chapters, often without much connection from one to another. Kaibah requires quite a bit of student patience as the reader is caught up in the daily concerns of sheepherding -- lambing, the sheep dip and the reduction of the flocks, problems not necessarily of much concern to modern students. Little Tree's life moves fairly quietly in modern terms from trying to protect Granpa's still to trading at the crossroads store.

In spite of these problems, these three autobiographies offer many opportunities to understand Indian life and values. We learn about Indian ceremonies. Eastman describes the naming ceremony when he received his name, Ohiyesa, meaning "Winner" because Mankato's Wahpetons had won the lacrosse game and his Maidens' Feast in 1871 in Manitoba just before his father found him and took him to his new life. Kay Bennett describes the Squaw Dance with its preparations, which cured her brother Keedah's headaches and the Yei-be-Chai Dance with its sandpainting. Little Tree cannot tell about ceremonies because his grandparents were among those Cherokee who moved far back into the mountains at the time that most of the tribe left for Oklahoma. But there were memories of ceremonies: the marriage stick belonging to Grandpa's father and mother, "hickory and gnarled, unbroken still, and filled with notches they carved in it each time they had a sorrow, a happiness, a quarrel they had mended,"⁸ and the harvest festivals when the Cherokee farmed the rich valleys of Tennessee.

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In all three books we learn of the heart-breaking history of the tribes. Ohiyesa's entire story is that of the hardships of nomadic life following the Sioux Uprising but also of the dignity of continuing a way of life which the tribe had known during better times when they lived and farmed along the Minnesota River before the Uprising. Never forgotten in Kaibah are the hardships the Navajo tribe suffered when they were incarcerated at Fort Sumner in 1868 and their effects on Kaibah's family. Little Tree learns from his Granma and Granpa about the Cherokees' Trail of Tears, when they were forced to move from Tennessee to Oklahoma, but he feels the tragedy of it most in his Grandparents' relationship with Willow John, a man who walked west to the Nations, but after three years returned to Tennessee, saying there was no Nation.

The testing motif, which is so prominent in many Indian myths, becomes a part of growing up for these children. Until the white man interfered, the questions "Who am I?" and "What do I want to become?" had very definite answers. Ohiyesa writes, "I was almost fifteen years old when my uncle presented me with a flint-lock gun....All the war-songs that I had ever heard from childhood came back to me with their heroes. It seemed as if I were an entirely new being -- the boy had become a man!... I shall soon be able to go among the whites whenever I wish, and to avenge the blood of my father and brothers."⁷ It is only in Eastman's second autobiography, From Deep Woods to Civilization, that we learn how Ohiyesa heeded his father's advice to "learn the white man's way" and go to school. Kaibah learned very early that her job was to herd sheep: "She soon learned to know the sheep -- which ones were bad tempered, and which ones would give her trouble. She learned to keep an eye on the unruly goats, and to anticipate their moves. The weather remained fair. And, as she gained more confidence, she began to enjoy her work."⁸ But before long the authorities put pressure on Mother Chischillie to send Kaibah to school, which led to an entirely new identity. Little Tree tells of the comfort he received from being with his grandparents:

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Granma sang and rocked back and forth. And I could hear the wind talking, and Lay-Nah, the spring branch, singing about me and telling all my brothers.

I knew that I was Little Tree, and I was happy that they loved me and wanted me. And so I slept, and did not cry.

But the authorities came, too, for Little Tree to take him away to school.

From these three books we learn about values that are especially Indian. All three of these children learn to live with nature and to work with it without abusing it.

Ohiyesa's uncle gives him advice: "In hunting ... you will be guided by the habits of the animal you seek....Most large game moves about continually, except the doe in the spring; it is then a very easy matter to find her with the fawn. Conceal yourself in a convenient place as soon as you observe any signs of the presence of either, and then call with your birchen doe caller."¹⁰ Kaibah learns from her older brother about sheep and goats:

"You must watch the goats....They wander farther than the sheep and lead them away from the herd. Goats like to climb hills and will teach the sheep to run wild if you let them."¹¹ And Little Tree learns from Granpa about The Way: "Take only what ye need. When ye take the deer, do not take the best. Take the smaller and the slower and then the deer will grow stronger and always give you meat."¹²

Olney says of autobiography, "...behind the question 'What is Man?' lies another more insistent question -- the ultimate and most important question, I should think, for every Man: 'How shall I live?' If autobiography can advance our understanding of that question, and I think it can, then it is very valuable literature indeed."¹³ If students can understand the patience and fortitude of Ohiyesa in famine and hardship, the dignity with which Kaibah's Mother Chischilli faced the changes in her fundamental way of living, and Granpa's and Little Tree's acceptance of the discrimination they faced on the bus and in the village, they will have a basis for deeper understanding in the more advanced Indian literature of N. Scott Momaday, James Welch and Leslie Marmon Silko.

Notes

1. James Olney, Metaphors of Self: the Meaning of Autobiography (Princeton, 1972) p. VII.
2. Charles Eastman, Indian Boyhood [1902] (New York, 1971) p. 4.
3. Ibid.
4. N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words," Literature of the American Indian, ed. by Abraham Chapman (New York, 1975) p. 103.
5. Forrest Carter, The Education of Little Tree (New York, 1976) p. 173.
6. Ibid. p. 46.
7. Eastman, pp. 243-244.
8. Kay Bennett, Kaibah: Recollections of a Navajo Girlhood (Los Angeles, 1964) p. 33.
9. Carter, p. 5
10. Eastman, pp. 45-46.
11. Bennett, p. 29
12. Carter, p. 9
13. Olney, p. XI.

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